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ABSTRACT

Suggestions to assist teachers in preparing a course in death education are offered. Although there is not currently a standard for preparation or licensing of potential death educators, there are opportunities available for learning about formal dimensions of death education and counseling. Professional development experiences are available through a variety of workshops and symposia, as well as local organizations concerned with death and dying or specific serious illnesses. Helping organizations that sponsor research, workshops/symposia, and disseminate professional literature are identified. The following concerns are addressed: class goals and objectives, content and teaching methods, available teaching guides and resources, student requirements, assessment, and expectations of the teacher. A bibliography is included. (SW)

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THE MAKING OF A DEATH EDUCATOR

by

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THE MAKING OF A DEATH EDUCATOR

Death education has been showing signs of progressive development as an academic subject in recent years at all educational levels and particularly within colleges and universities. Many of those responsible for formal classroom instruction acquired their credentials in health education or the broader fields of the health sciences. At present, it is not known just how many courses are taught by health educators and how many are offered within health education divisions. However, a recent study by Cummins[1] suggests that health education ranks about fifth among academic disciplines offering such courses. Perhaps an up-to-date inquiry relative to number and kind of death education courses offered within the auspices of health education would be of some import. An investigation of this sort is currently in the process of being formulated by the author.

A cursory examination of current interest areas of health educators identified in annual editions of the publication, A National Directory of Colleges and University School and Public Health Educators,[2] reveals increasing interest in death education. Thus it is perhaps safe to assume that several college and university teachers of health education began teaching specialized units or courses in death education for the very first time during the present academic year. Many of these have assumed this challenge having little if any specialized professional preparation. For the beginning teacher, preparation for that first encounter with a classroom of curious, heterogeneous students will require some significant self-development, prudent goal setting, and careful planning of pedagogical experiences. The following discussion offers some brief answers to questions that will surely assist the neophyte teacher in preparation for launching her or

his initial course experience in death education.

Where to Begin?

At present, there is no logical starting point. There are no programs leading to certification in death education, no licensing organizations, and little formalized professional preparation other than the usual death education course and sponsored symposia/workshops covering a variety of concerns. The movement has matured so rapidly and in so many directions that few guidelines and boundaries have been established. The Forum for Death Education and Counseling, however, is promoting efforts to develop standards and upgrade the quality of education and counseling.[3] The Forum has recently emerged as an organization concerned about all aspects of quality control within the death education and counseling movement.[4] With time, a legitimate process should emanate from the Forum that will offer guidelines and give added direction to the preparation and licensing of potential death educators. For now, the aspiring teaching must examine and seek other opportunities for the purpose of professional development.

What Opportunities are Available for Professional Development?

Myriad opportunities are now available for prospective teachers to utilize in the process of learning about formal dimensions of death education and counseling. The most obvious vehicle available for learning about death education including content, instructional methodology, and assessment techniques is to enroll in a well structured death education course taught by an experienced thanatologist. This should establish many of the basics that are prerequisite to becoming a teacher.

If this is not possible, or in addition to the course experience, other approaches can be utilized. Self-development is being made possible through the ample supply and availability of professional resources. Within the past five years or so a plethora of excellent recources have emerged including periodical literature, books, audiovisuals, professional journals, and support organizations.

Reading widely from the professional literature is a must for the prospective teacher of thanatology. Several journals now publish death-related articles. Two quarterly journals, Death Education[5] and Omega,[6] publish excellent articles that focus on a variety of subjects related to death education and counseling. These journals should be available in most large libraries. One may wish to subscribe to one or both of these. Several excellent books, geared to introductory courses as well as advanced inquiry, are available. Books such as those edited by Feifel,[7] Wass,[8] and Shneidman[9] and single-authored texts by Kastenbaum[10] and Kubler-Ross[11] provide sufficient material to promote a comprehensive understanding of the generic bases of death, dying, and bereavement. One or more of these can serve well as a required text for college and university classes. In addition to the books identified here, there are hundreds of other well written resources on the market that address both generic and specific dimensions of death and dying.

Professional development experiences are available through a variety of workshops and symposia. For the past two years, the Forum for Death Education and Counseling has sponsored two extensive week-long workshops for the purpose of providing teachers and potential teachers of death education courses with information relative to theoretical, methodological, and ethical aspects of death education and

counseling. The Foundation of Thanatology[12] and the Center for Death Education and Research[13] also provide periodic experiences of this nature. Many local centers for the health sciences, health departments, and community agencies sponsor an occasional symposium.

The potential teacher can acquire pertinent information along with practical experience through affiliation with local "care" organizations. Components such as the Hospice, Living Today, and the Society of Compassionate Friends to name a few, offer opportunities for involvement and learning. Local representatives of funeral homes and cemeteries may serve as sources for stimulating interest relative to consumer affairs and the funeral industry in general.

Are There Support Organizations?

With the growth of death education as a discipline to be studied and with the "going public" of people with invested interest in death and dying phenomena, a host of helping organizations have surfaced. Information about 80 or more of these organizations is provided in a resource guide recently compiled by Wass and others.[14] Three of these, Forum for Death Education and Counseling, Foundation of Thanatology, and the Center for Death Education and Research, are interested in all aspects of death and dying, grief, and bereavement. These organizations sponsor research, workshops, and symposia and disseminate professional literature. Each of these is also committed to the improvement of quality death education at all levels. The death educator should find the Forum for Death Education and Counseling to be particularly relevant to her or his many needs. It is a nonprofit organization representing health professionals, educators, and counselors.

Other organizations have been organized to further the needs of those with specialized interests in such areas as euthanasia, cancer, medical ethics, life-threatening illnesses, leukemia, Down's Syndrome, muscular dystrophy, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and the like. Many of these are supported through local affiliates.

What Goals and Objectives Should Be Pursued?

At the outset, the beginning teacher may experience difficulty developing and organizing a particular schema appropriate for a class of heterogeneous students. Consequently, early attempts at organization calls for some degree of flexibility and creativity. Soon after the teacher has formulated objectives it may become necessary to make several modifications in order to meet student needs and to be more congruent with the interests of students. One should not be afraid to make adjustments and to depart from the original operational plan. The good teacher responds to needed change in light of appropriate feedback.

Published works by Gordon and Klass,[15] Knott,[16] and Leviton[17] provide excellent suggestions for goal setting. Several of their ideas have been incorporated into objectives which I attempt to achieve in my own class in death education. Some or all of these may be useful. Keep in mind that the following objectives should vary commensurate with target populations and course purposes:

1. To disseminate relevant and academic types of information concerning the broad spectrum of the field of thanatology.
2. To identify personal and emotional resources necessary for coping with personal loss or the death of significant others.

3. To educate the student as consumer relative to the commercial death market.
4. To understand childhood and death and establish appropriate means of communicating with children confronted with death.
5. To examine the dynamics of grief and reaction of different age groups to the death of meaningful others.
6. To understand causation and the dynamics of adolescent suicide and self-destructive behaviors of older persons.
7. To examine and formulate socioethical issues related to death and define value judgements these issues raise.
8. To develop ease with which students can refer to and utilize death language.
9. To attempt to understand as much as possible about the death system.
10. To diminish anxieties, fears, and taboos surrounding death and dying.

Death education has been defined by Leviton[18] as "a developmental process that transmits to people and society death-related knowledge and implications resulting from that knowledge." Based on this definition, objectives should then reflect both cognitive and affective dimensions. Students need basic knowledge that will inturn give some direction in their confrontation with the dying process, death management, and grief reactions.

What Should Be Taught and by What Methods?

Like course objectives, the nature of course content will vary from class to class depending upon student interest, background, and capacity. A large degree of diversity will be evident in any large

class of students. Experienced thanatologists indicate that students enroll in classes for a variety of reasons including personal curiosity, an "easy" three credits, a particular grading system that may utilize a pass-fail format, to overcome the fear of death, to learn more about the subject, among others. Probably very few matriculate for the purpose of becoming involved in serious scholarly inquiry. Thus, the ordering of content for the first time or so around tends to be of an experimental nature.

Recent publications by Leviton,[19] Knott,[20] and Corr[21] provide excellent direction for the development of a course syllabus. In general, suggested course content focuses on a triad of learning experiences that includes (1) an examination of personal phenomena, (2) sociocultural aspects surrounding death and dying, and (3) pursuits that require study in a singular aspect of death and dying such as euthanasia, cremation, or suicide. While there should not be a fixed curriculum for all groups of students, Knott[22] suggests that three considerations should be relevant to any and all learners: (1) There should be both personal and professional components to the experience; (2) There are several role-related instructional objectives that are influenced by specific needs of students, e.g., teachers, nurses, parents; and (3) Death education should aim at getting all of us in touch with what best enhances purpose and satisfaction we derive from living as we accept mortality and experience loss.

My own course focuses on the following kinds of topics: (1) Death education resources; (2) Scope of death education; (3) Changing attitudes toward death and dying; (4) Sociopsychological aspects of dying; (5) Death and aging; (6) Life-threatening illness; (7) Care

models for the dying; (8) Childhood and death; (9) Self-destructive behavior and death from suicide; (10) Death and the contemporary funeral; (11) Definitions/interpretations of death; (12) The funeral industry; (13) Bereavement and grief; (14) Death and the law; and (15) Euthanasia or the right to die. Unequal emphasis is accorded individual topics depending upon student interest and available resources. These units can also be sequenced or ordered in a number of ways to meet the needs of individual learners.

Instructional methods appropriate for death education are very similar to those utilized in any other academic course. These methods include the usual didactic exercises, individual and group discussions, role playing, and prudent use of audio-visual materials. However, since death education connotes a multidisciplinary focus, pragmatic use of professionals representing other disciplines is recommended. In addition, proper use of community resources (e.g., morticians, clergy, care givers) should be practiced. Carefully structured field experiences also add spice to the maximum utilization of instructional modalities.

What Resources Are Available?

Sound resources are now fairly abundant representing such categories as professional literature, audiovisuals, and lay and professional support organizations. Several of these have been previously identified. During 1980, two guides to death education and counseling resources were published: (1) an exemplary guide for students and teachers of death education and counseling,[23] and (2) a more comprehensive, annotated resource guide.[24] The latter publication presents resources with annotations for a great number of journal articles (grouped according to grade levels), books, professional organizations, community resources, curriculum guides, bibliographies, over 500 audiovisuals with addresses

of publishers, professional journals, and a chapter delineating some of the latest research in the area of attitude assessment.

If a course is going to be taught on a regular basis then a nominal budget must be formulated for purposes of equipping the teacher as well as the institutional library. Without adequate literature and audiovisuals, students will be seriously handicapped when it becomes necessary or desirable to engage in scholarly inquiry. Once the new teacher has taught a course for the first time then he or she will have adequate insight into the kinds of resources that are requisite for the optimum facilitation of instruction.

What Should be Expected of Students?

Again, the kinds of requirements placed on students will be much like experiences evident in other classes. Oral reporting, writing compositions, conducting research, and responding to oral or written examinations all provide vehicles for involving students. Ample opportunity should be provided for discussion purposes, to express feelings, and to share meaningful experiences with others. Otherwise, the "I-oriented" component is neglected and the class operates from a sterile platform devoid of feelings.

Are There Assessment Tools Available?

For the most part, limited work has been done in the areas of evaluation and research. Instead, attention has been devoted to development, expansion, and refinement of the movement and to development of rationale for program and curriculum. The collection of scientific data for the justification of death education has lagged behind other developing aspects. As the field of death education gains in stature and scope, the scientific sphere should gain additional

momentum.

For the present, only a few studies have assessed attitudinal changes of students toward a death education experience following a prescribed number of hours of instruction. According to Sanders,[25] the current paucity of quality, systematic studies reflects an obvious need for scholars to engage in the arduous task of effectively assessing death attitudes and changes of students as a result of a pedagogical experience. Sanders[26] and others[27] have developed useful compendiums of recently completed studies indicative of current efforts to research and assess death attitudes.

Some advanced students have focused on developing other assessment tools as a dissertation requirement. Other correlates of death and dying are being examined by thanatologists though the current output if somewhat minimal. Such studies are available in the literature representing the social sciences. Both Omega and Death Education are outlets for research reporting. Some book authors have included helpful inventories and instructional/assessment tools as part of an appendix.

What Will the New Teacher Experience?

Briefly, a neophyte teacher may be able to make several observations subsequent to teaching a course in death education. First, there may be some subtle outside pressure applied by persons unacquainted with the instructional procedures. Some may question why a course in death education. Others may demonstrate subtle cynicism Any negative reactions, however, will certainly be of limited consequence. Most professionals will applaud the teacher's efforts in exploring the heretofore "unplowed territory."

Second, as with any course, some students will quickly discover that "this course is not for me." Some may get more death education than they originally had intended, thus a quick loss of interest. Providing for a variety of instructional strategies and student experiences may help to diminish this possibility.

As a third concern, the teacher too may discover that the flame illuminating death education can quickly burn out. New courses and new experiences sometimes sound exciting at the outset, but with some indepth probing the interest may wane. Or, stated in another way, some may have difficulty looking death in the eye over an extended period of time.

Fourth, new teachers will quickly discover that death education entails a broad, multidisciplinary focus. The content transcends such areas as law, medicine, philosophy, religion, sociology, and psychology. One cannot teach death education just because he or she is fascinated with it. Considerable knowledge and expertise are needed in order to conduct meaningful classroom experiences. The greater the command of knowledge representative of these fields the greater should be educational outcomes for students.

In conclusion, death education is an important concern; it is a legitimate responsibility of formal schooling. Helping students to understand the myriad dimensions of what Kastenbaum[28] calls the "death system" should be a major commitment by educators in general and health educators in particular. Learning about the ending of life is no less important than knowing about the beginning of life and other phases of development that transcend the entire lifespan. Health educators, with commitment toward sound professional development, can

be a significant part of this adventure.

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[12]For additional information write: Foundation of Thanatology, 630 West 168th Street, New York, NY 10032.

[13]For additional information write: Center for Death Education and Research, 1167 Social Science Bldg., University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455.

[14]Wass, H. et al. Death Education: An Annotated Resource Guide. Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere, 1980.

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[17]Leviton, D. "The Scope of Death Education," Death Education, 1(1): 41-56, 1977.

[18]Ibid, p. 44.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Knott, op cit.

[21]Corr, C.A. "A Model Syllabus for Death and Dying Courses," Death Education, 1(4):433-458, Winter 1978.

[22]Knott, op. cit., p. 392.

[23]Crase, D. "Death Education Resources," Journal of School Health, 50(7): 411-415, 1980.

[24]Wass, et al, op. cit.

[25]Sanders, C.M. "Research and Assessment of Death Attitudes," in Wass, H. (ed.). Dying: Facing the Facts. Washington, D.C.:Hemisphere, 1980.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Crase, D. "Death Education: Accountability Through Scholarly Inquiry," Journal of The American College Health Association, 27:257-260, April 1979.

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